



The Mountain and The Sky

I visited Shinichiro Koromo's workplace-cum-atelier on the shores of Lake Haruna, where I had an opportunity to see his work in an orderly room (or rather, a temporary space set up using a plywood wall) that reflected his meticulous nature. His past paintings were packed and stored in a separate area, and there were no unfinished canvases leaning against the walls of the room. I thought that this was to remove superfluous items from the artist's field of vision, allowing him to concentrate on a single painting, but I also felt, somehow, that the atelier reflected the artist's low center of gravity, the strength in his legs and lower back. I wondered if he had developed this strength through ice hockey, which he had played until junior high school, but I did not entertain that thought any further.

At first glance, it seems that Koromo's paintings are created through careful consideration of the choice of forms and the arrangement of color surfaces, and that he probably paints by making use of conceptual manipulation. At the same time, I can sense something emanating from within Koromo. It is a physicality that feels different from the physicality that accompanies the act of painting, such as discerning the movements of brush and arm from the swell of the paint, and it can be said to be the benchmark by which Koromo's existence is compared to the outside world that surrounds him. The way Koromo understands the world appears on the canvas as a viewpoint from a height. Although the viewpoint is set high to depict a bird's eye view of the landscape below, there is no sense of instability that one might expect from such a viewpoint. The viewpoint is not that of a drone flying overhead, but instead, it is reminiscent of Koromo taking a photograph with a tripod with his feet firmly planted on the ground, his line of sight fixed forward and slightly downward.

During my visit, I took the bus from Takasaki to Lake Haruna. As we ascended the mountain road and finally crossed the Tenjin Pass, Lake Haruna and Haruna Fuji unfurled before my eyes. On the way back, Koromo drove me through Ikaho, a familiar town where he grew up, and down the mountain to Shibukawa Station. Throughout our undulating route, there were several places where we could see the town from our lofty position on the mountain, and I realized that height was not a concept created because it was necessary for the composition of the canvas, but rather a sense of space that had accumulated in Koromo through his eyes since he was a child. While I was satisfied that I had unearthed one of the charms of Koromo's work, this alone was not enough to unlock the mystery of his work. When we look at Koromo's paintings, we see that he does not simply depict landscapes using a bird's-eye view. His paintings occasionally escape the shackles of a reproduction of a real-life landscape, with various objects arranged in ways that violate the principles of perspective. If this is the case, then height is not merely a matter of perspective.

Koromo stands on the slope and glances downward. His feet are on the ground, balancing the rest of his body. What about his upper body? What if his upper body, including his eyes, is separated from the mountain and is one with the sky? Koromo's body perceives the world based on the mountain and the sky.

Isn't that something that can also be discerned from the canvas? In the case of a landscape painting, if his feet and the sky are both on Koromo's side at the same time, then the boundary between the mountains and the sky will be at the far end of the space, and from there, if the sky turns around and moves to the top of the canvas, it will return to the front. From this point, it is possible to depict things that cannot exist in the real sky as if they were floating in the space on the canvas that has been designated as the sky, and to imbue the space with a sense of realism. Even if the sky is not depicted, it is possible to insert objects of a different scale as the space above is similar to Koromo.



Let's dive a little deeper into Koromo's paintings. Even though his paintings appear to depict expansive rural landscapes, in many cases objects in his paintings are reduced to a juxtaposition of fine color surfaces, and occasionally symbols of contemporary society are also depicted. The decomposition of space through color surfaces is emphasized, and in a space that seems to fold back at the top and bottom, an ancient tomb appears, moving from the back to the front. Gunma Prefecture is home to many ancient tombs, and Koromo has been including them in his paintings since the early stages of his career. His interest in these ancient tombs has surged in recent years, and he has gone on journeys to visit them, so it is inconceivable that they are simply trademark-like existences. These ancient tombs must also be closely related to Koromo's spatial compositions in his paintings.

When looking down at a certain location, perspective is perceived in terms of up and down. The lower part of the canvas is in the foreground, close to the viewer, and the upper part of the canvas is further away from the viewer. Koromo's paintings follow a similar pattern, but the upper part of the canvas, which is supposed to be far away, feels as though it is in the foreground. In this case, there is no distant view in the painting. The middle ground is depicted in the center of the canvas, sandwiched between the upper and lower foregrounds. What is the middle ground? It is not something that can be observed in detail and depicted clearly like nearby objects. It is also not something that should be understood only in general terms because it is far away, or something that should be vague in places. The middle ground is a place where concrete things come and go, a space in which we can recognize the movement of these things and the passage of time. Koromo paints an ancient tomb in the middle ground. If so, the ancient tomb exists as a representation of human activity. This supposition is not so far-fetched if we remember that he has painted keyhole-shaped mounds vertically, superimposed on top of human heads, in his earlier work.

We stand in front of a modern landscape. Although mankind has had a hand in everything here, there can be little sign of human beings at times. Across this landscape, Koromo tries to overlay time and the way human beings live, calmly yet powerfully.

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